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# Remarks at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law Commencement

Tom Perez

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REMARKS BY U.S. SECRETARY OF LABOR TOM PEREZ  
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND FRANCIS KING CAREY SCHOOL OF LAW COMMENCEMENT  
MAY 20, 2016 - BALTIMORE, MD

### ***Introduction***

Good morning, deans, class presidents, administrators parents, students, alumni, and friends: thank you for the honor of addressing you today. It is so good to be home.

I want to recognize your outstanding faculty. I had the privilege of serving here on the faculty for many years. I can confirm that your professors don't get rich, but the nonmonetary rewards are priceless.

I am so proud to see that this school's remarkable clinical programs are going stronger than ever. I read that you provide more than 100,000 hours of free legal services to the community every year...and then double-checked to make sure it wasn't a typo, that someone hadn't added an extra "O" by accident. My parents always said that if you wanted to get into heaven, you'd need letters of reference from poor people. The clinic faculty and students here have briefcases full of them.

Graduates, I am here first and foremost to say: congratulations. You're closing the book on this part of your life and opening another -- that is, of course, your bar review book. I want to share with you what my bar review instructor told us on the first day of class. The goal of the bar review course is to prepare you to pass the bar exam... barely. There is no *summa cum laude* on the bar exam. You don't get extra points for an A. I've gotten many questions from judges, reporters, members of Congress, and the like over my lifetime, but no one has ever asked me what was my score on the bar exam.

While reflecting on what to say to you today, I conducted an admittedly unscientific poll of my senior team.

I asked them: what do you remember about your graduation commencement speaker? The most common answer was, "not a thing." The next most common answer was, "not a thing, and I don't even remember who it was."

A low bar, indeed. I thought of the optimistic aphorisms you often hear on days like this - "reach for the stars," "the world is your oyster," and so on. I'm allergic to oysters. So, if I say that, I might break out.

Instead, I want to talk to you about something most commencement speakers don't address: **the importance of failure**. I will also talk about the importance of what I often call - and they're not my original words - the **"fierce urgency of now."** And I'd also like to talk to you about the **justice and responsibility** that comes with your degree.

### ***Failure, Knowledge & Wisdom***

First, you might be wondering why I've invoked "failure" on a day that's all about your successes. Looking back on my life, I realize that I've learned a lot from the experiences that Dean Tobin described. But frankly, I've learned a lot more from my experiences of failure.

Life, in my judgment, is the search for both knowledge and wisdom. If you have one without the other,

you will not have enough, in my judgment. Books and lectures give you knowledge. But your life experiences make you wise. And if you want to get some wisdom, you're going to need to try and fail a few times. You're going to need to get knocked down and come back stronger. You're going to need to take some educated risks.

I've had the privilege of encountering people with remarkable knowledge: fancy diplomas on their walls, lots of A's on their transcripts. They've achieved great success by anyone's definition, but many of them lack real wisdom about the world. They've plotted out their life's course based on what will look good on their resumes, without allowing themselves any time to reflect or take risks.

I often wonder if there is an inverse correlation between the number of years you spend in school and your wisdom. No offense to anyone in this room. I would be offending myself. The wisest man I ever knew - my best friend's father, who stepped in to raise me when my dad passed away - had a 10th grade education. He showed me that wisdom comes from putting yourself out there, going through life's journeys, making mistakes and never being afraid to fail.

I'd offer a friendly amendment from my own life. There's no such thing as failure. The only failure is the failure to try, the failure to take some educated risks.

My own experiences of aiming high and falling short have been some of the most formative. If you look up my bio on DOL.gov, you'll find a list of achievements, and I'm proud of all of those opportunities to make a difference. But you won't see that I ran unsuccessfully for Attorney General in Maryland in 2006. I wanted the chance to protect and help the people of my state. I traveled all around Maryland making my case, picking up important endorsements and building a coalition of support. I thought I had a real chance of winning a tough campaign. But I never got to find out. A few weeks before the primary, I was kicked off the ballot by our state's highest court on a legal technicality.

It was devastating. Running for office any time carries the risk of failure, but I didn't even make it to Election Day. This very public defeat wasn't just a blow to my dreams, but to my ego. I had given up my seat on the county council, and I had no idea what I would do next.

My late mother, who passed away 11 years ago last week, always said to me, when one door closes, another window opens. I never quite understood that. I remember sitting at home thinking, *where's the window, mom? I'm not seeing it.*

But she, of course, was right. Shortly after that defeat, Governor Martin O'Malley opened a window when he asked me to run the state labor department. The knowledge and wisdom I gained from that experience was exactly what President Obama would later seek in a Secretary of Labor.

For me and so many others, failure was a springboard to opportunity.

Steve Jobs started Apple out of his garage at age 20, grew it into a multibillion dollar company, and then got fired at the age of 30. And of course, he returned to lead the company to new heights more than a decade later. Jobs said his firing was one of the best things that ever happened to him.

"Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick," he told Stanford graduates. "Don't lose faith."

When J.K. Rowling wrote the first volume of *Harry Potter*, she was receiving public assistance. Her first

manuscript was rejected by a reported 12 publishers. Getting those doors slammed in her face gave her exactly what she needed to move forward. She said, "Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself I could have learned no other way."

The legendary Michael Jordan himself once said, "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot. I've failed over and over and over again in my life, and that's why I succeed."

You've got a lot of knowledge, and you've worked hard to achieve it. But the wisdom that you will bring to bear in everything you do is a function of taking risks and overcoming adversity.

### ***Fierce Urgency of Now***

Sometimes adversity is professional, and sometimes it's personal. The personal adversity I experienced early in life taught me the second lesson I would like to share with you today. That is the "fierce urgency of now," or what my wife calls my "chronic impatience." She can confirm that it is both a blessing and a curse, and it has driven me for decades.

I can pinpoint the day I first felt it: June 29, 1974, the day my dad died suddenly of a massive heart attack. My mother had just had major surgery a few months before; and shortly after my father's death, she was hospitalized again. I was 12 years old. I remember going to bed at night in the summer of 1974 wondering whether I would wake up an orphan.

I made a deal with God that if he would give my mother good health, I would live every day with the fierce urgency of now - putting my parents' and my community's and my church's values into action. I wouldn't waste a minute. I learned then and there that yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift - that's why we call it the present.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave us the words to understand this concept, this "fierce urgency of now." And a little more recently, Lin-Manuel Miranda gave us the music.

My wife and I had the opportunity to see his remarkable show, "Hamilton." It's about the founding of our nation, told through the story of someone who both embodied and shaped our highest ideals.

Hamilton lived with the fierce urgency of now. He always heard the clock ticking, always felt like he was running out of time. In six months, he wrote 51 out of the 85 Federalist Papers.

Towards the end of Act I, Aaron Burr asks him, "Why do you write like you're running out of time? Why do you fight like you're running out of time?"

After the show, my wife said to me, "He kind of reminds me of you. He's chronically impatient." Indeed, I am chronically impatient because I meet people every single day in my line of work who are running out of time:

- The fast-food worker in Detroit who, the night before I met her, slept in her car with her three children, because that's all she could afford. She's running out of time.

- The kids I met here in Baltimore who got game, but don't got a rolodex. A young man told me he wanted to be challenged academically, but his school didn't offer any Advanced Placement classes. Another young woman admitted to me that she's sometimes late for school... because the gunshots in her neighborhood during the night made it hard to sleep. They're running out of time.
- The members of marginalized communities, here and across the country, whose experiences of discrimination should belong in our history books, not the front page of today's newspapers. They're running out of time.

Too many people are running out of time. They need someone to stop the clock for them. And if you're going to do that, you have to hear it ticking. You have to live with that fierce urgency of now. That's what being a lawyer is all about.

### ***Justice and Responsibility***

That brings me to my final observation: the issues of justice and responsibility. Every time I come to a university to give a talk like this, the first thing I do is look at your mission statement.

I didn't have to look this one up: "The University of Maryland School of Law seeks to promote a more just society by educating outstanding lawyers, by advancing understanding of law and legal institutions, and by enhancing access to justice."

Your mission statement couldn't be more relevant to the tasks at hand in this country. You need look no further than your own city - as Professor Greenberger's class calls it, "Freddie Gray's Baltimore" - to understand that civil rights remains the unfinished business of America.

Our country's journey has always been the search for a "more perfect union." It has been the privilege of my life to get us closer to that goal, and my legal training is what has made it possible. It's the tool I've used, in a variety of jobs, to confront the unacceptable disparity in health care between people who have money and people who don't...to help people whose lives had been turned upside down in the mortgage crisis... and to tackle the variety of challenges that keep people from enjoying equal access to our democracy.

At the Department of Labor, I use those skills to help people for whom the dignity of work remains out of reach. The March on Washington a little over 50 years ago was both a march for justice and a march for jobs. The striking sanitation workers in Memphis said, "Just because I pick up trash, doesn't mean you can treat me like garbage."

Using the law to tackle these interrelated challenges is how we forge a more perfect union. It's how we create an economy where you can go as far as your hard work takes you, where anyone can punch their ticket to the middle class. The unfinished business is to ensure that your zip code never determines your destiny, to create prosperity that isn't reserved for a lucky few but is broadly shared.

### ***Conclusion: Orchestra of Opportunity***

You have a remarkable opportunity here, and I leave you with this. I make it my business to do house

calls in this job. I met a guy named Randy Lewis a while back. Randy Lewis retired recently. He was a senior executive at Walgreens. He is also the father of a son with a disability. The privilege of raising his child taught him that as a nation, we all too frequently ignore the last seven letters of that word and focus on the first three. So he made it his mission in life's work to transform the business model of Walgreens.

He said to me something that I believe is very relevant today. "Tom, I've spent my life in the business community. You have spent your life in public service, at the Justice Department, HHS, and now the Labor Department. We may play instruments, but we're in the same orchestra. It's the orchestra of opportunity."

This orchestra needs more players, because opportunity remains elusive in too many parts of this country. Every person in every zip code should enjoy that opportunity. You can be part of the expansion of that opportunity.

My last words for you this morning are: get those instruments out. Play those instruments with a fierce urgency of now. Never hesitate to challenge yourself to learn a difficult song. Don't be afraid to play the wrong notes every once in a while - and if you do, get right back to playing.

We need you in the orchestra, here in Baltimore and around the country... with the remarkable educational foundation you have received from this institution, and the remarkable wisdom you have gained in your life, and will continue to gain in your life, I frankly can't wait to hear the music that you are going to create. Make it loud, make it often, and make it soon. Thank you very much.